

## *The Ecstatic Path To Healing In Psychotherapy*

**by Belinda Gore, Ph.D.**



Belinda Gore, Ph.D., is a psychologist in private practice in Columbus, Ohio, and has been a friend and colleague of Dr. Felicitas Goodman for the past twenty years. In addition to incorporating ecstatic trance in her psychotherapy practice, Belinda teaches ritual posture workshops internationally and has escorted small groups around the world to explore the landscape and culture of the horticultural people who recorded the postures in their artwork. She is the president of The Cuyamungue Institute, a center for research and education about ritual body postures near Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her book *Ecstatic Body Postures: An Alternate Reality Workbook* (1995) introduces thirty-seven ritual postures and the method for using them.

## *ABSTRACT*

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Ecstasy is a path to wholeness, a healing of the split between the right hand path of logic and reason and the left hand path of passion and dreams. Ecstatic trance in psychotherapy can catalyze the process of healing by bringing these two essential functions into balance. This article reviews several case histories to explore the impact of ecstatic trance in therapy. Three individuals' stories are reported: a woman with breast cancer who wanted to use non-ordinary states of consciousness to support her medical treatment, a female attorney who resisted revealing the details of her inner struggle, and a highly visual and kinesthetically oriented man for whom "talk therapy" was not meaningful. The method for introducing ecstatic trance and the techniques for incorporating ecstatic experiences into the healing process will be discussed.

## *Introduction*

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Ecstasy is a path to wholeness, a healing of the split between the right hand path of logic and reason and the left hand path of passion and dreams. Ecstatic trance in psychotherapy can catalyze the process of healing by bringing these two essential functions into balance.

Contemplative spiritual traditions as well as traditional methods of psychotherapy emphasize using the mind to transcend personality and all of its limitations and illusions. Meditation techniques teach objective observation of the mind as well as methods for emptying the mind of its contents. Traditional psychodynamic therapies highlight self-awareness and insight through analysis of personal history and resolving key life events. Ecstatic traditions, on the other hand, focus on using the body to gain experience in non-rational ways. The method known as ecstatic trance teaches the use of ritual body postures along with rhythmic stimulation of the nervous system (usually through drumming or rattling) as the means for transcending personality. In other words, through ecstatic trance clients in psychotherapy can go beyond their accustomed identification with ego by altering the body, with ritual posture and neural stimu-

lation. Experiences in non-ordinary states of consciousness can then be translated into a different way of being in the world.

The relevant issue is not which technique is better. The fundamental task of every healing modality is to restore wholeness. As soon as we are born, humans begin to experience a sense of separation or disconnection - from each other, from the rest of the world, and even from our own true nature. Our need in therapy, as in all healing, is to reconnect with our essential wholeness. Psychology offers tools and constructs to identify and understand the internal barriers that cause us to resist wholeness. In psychotherapy using ecstatic trance, the client is offered an opportunity to experience the barriers and their resolution.

Ecstatic trance is a term coined by Dr. Felicitas D. Goodman, a religious anthropologist who discovered that the unusual body positions represented in the artwork of indigenous people around the world are in fact ritual postures. These postures rely on the human body as the common denominator linking ancient and contemporary indigenous people with modern city dwellers. Anyone can use the postures as part of a simple method to explore realms of spirit that Goodman terms the Alternate Reality, dimensions of consciousness that have been traversed by shamans and other religious specialists for thousands of years.

### *Reflecting Practice*

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After teaching ecstatic body posture workshops for several years under Dr. Goodman's direction, I began to explore the use of ecstatic trance in individual sessions with clients in my practice as a psychologist. I had seen how workshop participants were able to step beyond the limitations of their usual personality perspectives and have experiences in trance that

were quite literally transforming. It occurred to me that with some direction people who had no background in shamanic traditions could learn to use this method to address their personal problems. My role as therapist was to create the opportunity, using the established method for entering the trance state, and to provide assistance in interpreting the trance experience and in translating it into changes in ordinary life.

I had learned from workshop experience that the trance state alone is not sufficient for healing to occur. People must also be able to create meaning from what has happened to them in trance, using whatever definitions of reality they understand. In this way, trance experiences are similar to dreams. They only become useful and life changing when they are digested and integrated into our conscious awareness. Even when physical healing occurs, it cannot be sustained over time without parallel inner changes; otherwise, symptoms reoccur. In other words, even if the barriers to wholeness are lifted during the trance, we need some way to understand what happened and to undertake practices that will help us sustain the changes. The role of the elders initiating younger members of a tribe, for instance, was to create the circumstances for an experience of non-ordinary reality and then to help the initiate understand what had occurred and to translate this initiatory experience into meaningful ways of living as a spiritually mature adult and productive member of the tribal community.

The therapist using ecstatic trance takes on a role similar to the elder or shaman. In order to be able to perform this role, we as therapists must have had sufficient personal experience with ecstatic trance to be able to guide our clients. This includes a thorough understanding of the elements that together create the context for ecstatic experience as well as a familiarity with the Alternate Reality so that we can reliably help our clients understand how it functions. Personal ongoing trance experience

within a group is invaluable and some knowledge of tradition regarding the Dreamtime, or Alternate Reality, is extremely useful. Proficiency with only a few basic postures is sufficient, possibly one healing posture, a divination posture, as well as one used for metamorphosis and perhaps one for spirit journeying. Use of an audiotape or CD of rattling or drumming makes it unnecessary for the therapist to be expert in the use of the rattle, although rattling or drumming is a wonderful practice for those who are motivated to learn it.

My usual way of introducing a client to ecstatic trance is to say that I have been working for nineteen years with an anthropologist who discovered that indigenous people around the world had documented in their artwork very specific postures that were used as rituals to gain access to non-ordinary states of consciousness. I often suggest reading the first two chapters of *Ecstatic Body Postures: An Alternate Reality Workbook*; this serves as a means for introducing the story of Dr. Goodman's discovery of the postures, the historical background of hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies from which they came, as well as examples of the potential uses of ecstatic trance. People who are uncomfortable with the method or are just not interested in an alternative approach to therapy have a chance to discover this in advance and to make a decision about whether to proceed. At the next appointment we address any questions that have arisen from their reading. It is important for a person who is new to shamanic practice to deal with any apprehensions in advance so that it is possible to surrender ego control during the trance experience. I try never to assume that others will have the same love for trance as I do, although I express my confidence in the process and may relate my own experiences with the Alternate Reality.

### *Five basic elements of ecstatic experience*

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Before our first trance session I review in detail the five basic elements that underlie ecstatic experience.

#### **1.) PREPARATION**

First, we have to prepare ourselves for ritual. It is important to make changes to the room and with ourselves to indicate that we are making a shift from ordinary reality to the realm of spirit. Together my client and I create a small altar in the floor of my office using a woven cloth and a few special objects, including my bowl of corn meal, a shell for burning sage and my small rattle. Because I share office space with other therapists who are in session with their clients while we are rattling, I choose a delicate gourd rattle that makes a light singing noise for use in the office. It does not have to be loud to be effective. Some people prefer to use the audiotape or CD of rattling that is available through the Cuyamungue Institute and in some cases use headphones to be able to control the sound level.

Another aspect of preparing ourselves is a very old tradition known as smudging that is, using the smoke of a fragrant herb or resin to cleanse the room and our personal energy. Since the smoke is visible but does not have substance, it exists between the world of spirit and the material world, showing us how to be in both worlds as well. I demonstrate scooping the smoke with my hands and “bathing” my body. Most people like the fragrance and notice how it seemed to change the mood in the room. Also in consideration for my office mates I burn only white sage or copal, preferring their sweet aroma to the more acrid smell of some smudge sticks, an odor that has occasionally raised questions from other clients about whether we were smoking marijuana behind our closed door.

## **2.) CREATE SACRED SPACE**

The second step is to create sacred space in the office by inviting the spirits, the inhabitants of other levels of reality, to be with us. When I first began using ecstatic trance with my clients, I was reluctant to talk about spirits with them. However, I learned that when I was matter-of-fact about the existence of non-material reality, my clients easily accepted that there are other dimensions of reality. Some people relate best to the idea of angels, others to the concept of archetypes, and others are most comfortable with acknowledging the spirits of trees, animals, and other elements in the natural world. The beauty of our work with ecstatic trance is that we are not teaching a dogma, only a method. People have the opportunity to ascribe meaning to their experiences however they wish.

To invoke the spirits, I “feed” the rattle with a pinch of blue corn meal, explaining that in the worldview of the people whose artwork has preserved these ritual postures, everything has a spirit, even my rattle. We can awaken that spirit and ask it to call on spirits and forces in the Alternate Reality to assist us. Then I rattle to the east, the north, the west, and the south, to the places above and the places below, going in a counter-clockwise direction to acknowledge that we are entering the world of spirit where everything is reversed. I thank the spirits who have heard our call and have responded, welcoming them with another bit of cornmeal on which I have blown my breath, my signature that lets the spirits know that the gift is from me, on our behalf. Then I demonstrate the posture we have chosen.

## **3.) QUIETING THE MIND**

The third element of ecstatic experience is quieting the mind. The so-called left- brain, the center of rational thought and the capacity to be abstract, creates an ongoing monologue of inner chatter that interferes with the perception of non-ordinary realities. To slow down that inner chatter we use a simple technique of counting natural breath, each inhala-

tion and exhalation counting as one breath, up to a total of fifty breaths, which takes about five minutes. Helping my client learn to notice wandering thoughts and bring the focus of awareness back to the breath is good practice for staying focused on the altered state of consciousness in trance.

#### **4.) PRESENCE OF A CONSISTENT RHYTHMIC SOUND**

The fourth necessary element for inducing ecstatic trance is the presence of a consistent rhythmic sound to cue the nervous system to open “alternate organs of perception.” The regular sound of the rattle, at a rhythm of 200-210 beats per minute, has both a stimulating and eventually a soothing effect. The sound alerts the body to change, to enter the world of Alternate Reality, and eventually to return to ordinary consciousness. We always stay within a fifteen-minute time frame for each session.

Sometimes people question whether it is safe to use ecstatic trance with clients who have dissociative disorders or psychotic tendencies. Our method provides structure, a means of giving the nervous system a cue to initiate the trance state and, most importantly, a cue to return to ordinary consciousness when the rattling stops. The capacity to enter non-ordinary consciousness on cue and to return to ordinary consciousness on cue is the characteristic that differentiates healthy ego boundaries from psychopathology. My belief, based on anecdotal experience and unsupported by good research, is that the technique is safe for people with mental illness; however, the idea of a trance state can be disturbing to people for whom shamanic practices are foreign. The choice is an important clinical judgment. My recommendation is to begin with clients who are enthusiastic and comfortable with the technique and to build a solid base of personal experience on which to base the decision about when it is appropriate to introduce ecstatic trance.

## **5.) POSTURE**

Finally, the last element is the ritual of the posture. I describe the posture as similar to a key that opens a locked door in the body, a door that opens into the Alternate Reality. The posture itself is the ritual, relying on the body rather than the mind to establish the intention for the experience. This is a difficult concept for many people to understand. Because the body performs the ritual simply through the details of the pose, we are not encumbered by differences in language and culture. The similarity in the human body's architecture allows post-modern city dwellers to enter dimensions of non-ordinary consciousness through the same doors as Neolithic medicine women or pre-Columbian Mexican shamans. Although the associates of the Cuyamungue Institute have researched at least 75 postures, the evidence in the artwork indicates that most small societies used only one to three postures. As therapists it is sufficient to have only a small repertoire but it is necessary to know them very well.

### *Cases*

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## **KRISTIN**

Introducing ecstatic trance into psychotherapy is easy when the client has contacted me with a specific request to do shamanic work. This was the case with Kristin, a 39-year-old computer programmer who had been referred to me by a colleague who knows my work with ecstatic trance. Kristin had been diagnosed with breast cancer and was already being treated with chemotherapy as well as acupuncture, chiropractic, and an herbal Ojibway remedy. She was familiar with working with dream states and guided imagery and was interested in Native American Earth-based spirituality.

Tests revealed that after five chemotherapy treatments Kristin's tumor had not spread and she had to make a decision about whether to have a mastectomy. We began with several sessions using guided imagery to

access her inner wisdom in making the decision. She had already decided to go ahead with the surgery before I introduced ecstatic trance. In this case she chose to rely on a method that was familiar to her for the decision-making, i.e., guided imagery, but was open to adding trance to support her healing. We agreed on the Bear Spirit Posture for this purpose.

During her first trance experience, she saw green and felt a pressure on her left chest (the tumor was in her left breast). At the same time, I had a vision of the Bear swiping the left side of her chest cavity with his massive claws and tearing away the tumor. When I shared this vision with her later, it helped her make sense of the pressure she had felt. Later, toward the end of the rattling session, she saw a wolf and an eagle emerge, both powerful animal totems, and she was bathed in purple and gold. She felt strong and empowered after our trance, and wanted to continue using ecstatic body postures for her healing.

Kristin had had a series of traumatic experiences prior to her diagnosis with breast cancer. Seven years before finding the breast tumor she had been in a car accident and suffered whiplash and ongoing fibromyalgia. The following year her mother died of a brain aneurysm after nearly three months in intensive care following brain surgery and a tracheotomy. Two years after her mother's death she was suffering from an ulcer as a result of her unresolved grief and anger. Soon afterward she was laid off from her job and she ended a relationship with her boyfriend. Clearly her immune system had been bombarded year after year with major stressors.

Rather than continue in therapy, it seemed that she would benefit from regular trance sessions and the support of others who incorporated ecstatic trance into their lives. I referred her to a weekly trance group

that she participated in for five or six years. Kristin's mastectomy was successful and eight years later she is cancer-free. She integrated trance into her spiritual practice and continues to participate in both ecstatic trance workshops and an ongoing monthly group. While she returned to therapy for a short time to deal with anxiety, her primary source of personal work continues to be through group trance experiences.

## **ANN**

Anne's experience in learning and using ecstatic trance was quite different. She was a 45 year-old attorney, married and the mother of a 12-year-old son from a previous marriage. She was being treated for depression by a psychiatrist but was having heart palpitations as a side effect of the medication. In general she felt hopeless and ineffectual in her roles as wife, mother, daughter and attorney, and was having suicidal thoughts. In our first session I identified the possibility of Adult Attention Deficit Disorder which, along with her depression, made it extremely difficult to maintain any organization in her work or at home. She admitted that she had resisted that diagnosis because of the shame her family had experienced when her brother was diagnosed with ADD. Her self-perception was that she was just lazy.

I waited until our sixth session to introduce ecstatic trance to her therapy process.. She was curious about trance and it offered a hopeful possibility after she had exhausted the traditional routes to healing. We used the Bear Spirit Posture for the first trance session, and the experience for Anne was hot and painful. She returned from trance sweating and reported that the Bear ate her worrying brain and told her to lean more on her husband. Despite her physical discomfort she was so enthusiastic about the relief she felt that she asked if we could do another posture the following week.

The next week we chose the Lady of Cholula Posture to give Anne an opportunity to ask more specifically what changes she needed to make to adjust to her workplace and to relieve her depression. She had a vision during trance of an episode from the television series “The X-Files.” Muldur and Scully, a man and woman team of investigators, play out reversed stereotypical roles; Muldur is a sensitive and intuitive man whose non-logical approach to investigations is scorned by his tough female partner. Anne related to Muldur and could take some pride in being intuitive and non-linear in her thinking even though that style was not valued in her workplace. Later in the trance the Lady of Cholula examined her brain and pronounced her physically whole. Again the trance experience was a great relief.

By the next week, Anne’s self-esteem was sagging again. This time I chose a metamorphosis posture. In my experience when clients are too intellectual in their approach to their problems they often need to feel what it could be like to exist in a different form with a completely different attitude toward life. To my surprise Anne did not have the usual experience of becoming an animal but spent the entire fifteen minutes as a rock; she described herself as “solid and invulnerable.” She was able to stay connected to those sensations, partly with the help of a small rock from my bookshelf that I gave to her as a way of remembering what had occurred in her trance. We were able to work more productively on specific behavior changes to relax the pressure engendered from her overly high standards that she set for herself and her son. She was also able to trace her family history of anxiety and depression, revealing the patterns she had learned from parents and grandparents.

Anne was doing well and using medications effectively to deal with the biochemical aspects of her depression and Attention-Deficit Disorder. However, a crisis occurred in her relationship with her husband and when

we had used all the sessions that her insurance company would certify, she left therapy. Unlike Kristin, she was not ready to join a group or workshop to strengthen her use of ecstatic trance to support to her healing. She left therapy several years ago and I have not heard from her since that time and so cannot report whether the insights she gained and the changes she made were long-lasting.

## **JONATHON**

Jonathon came to therapy with Diane, the woman he lived with. Diane had been involved in therapy for several months and asked Jonathon to join her to work on relationship issues. Diane was a college professor, very intelligent and highly articulate. She could talk circles around Jonathon, who managed landscaping crews and was a genius with growing trees but not with finding words to talk about his feelings. It occurred to me that one way to explore Jonathon's experience in the relationship would be to introduce ecstatic trance. The visions gave him a way to express his interior experience and, as we unexpectedly discovered, provided him a way to lead in the relationship, as Diane had difficulty surrendering to trance while he was completely at home in this arena. His trance experiences were typically visual without much action but deeply meaningful to him. As he shared those visions and perceptions, I learned to appreciate his inner language of image and metaphor and was able to build upon it using art work in our sessions as well as ecstatic trance.

It soon became clear that Jonathon needed to explore his anger and resentment over feeling used by other people, including Diane. He was unable to say "No" to other people's expectations of him, fearing their anger toward him. It was important for him to experience his own strength as well as to find ways to care for himself.

Early in our sequence of trance sessions, Jonathon used a metamorphosis posture, the Tattooed Jaguar Posture, to feel his own power and internal

rhythms. For much of the trance he was a tree; even though it is rare for people to change into a plant in this posture, it was understandable since he worked with trees every day and related to them as his companions. As a tree, he repeatedly experienced the cycles of growth and dormancy. Then he became a bear and went into hibernation. His comment later was that he needed to be reminded that in the nature there are always periods of rest and that his body and soul were craving some time to be quiet, to rest from his arduous physical work as well as from constant confrontation in his relationship with Diane. He decided to accept an invitation from his coworkers to accompany them back to their home in Guanajuato, Mexico, during the two winter months when the nursery was closed. The time off turned out to be immensely restorative.

Managing his fear and demonstrating his power were significant issues for Jonathon. On one occasion we asked the Olmec Diviner about how to deal with fear. We framed it as a general question about fear because the Olmec Diviner so often deals with global or collective issues rather than personal concerns. Jonathon's experience was one of being a rabbit hiding in the middle of bramble bushes, made safe by the thorns and dense matting of twigs from the bushes. He understood that his best strategy was just to wait, to be calm and present and eventually the predators would grow tired and leave. If he ran, the predators would just grab him and eat him. Therefore, with his aggressive boss and even with his verbally aggressive girlfriend, he was better off just sitting quietly through their rampages, knowing that he could find a place of safety within himself. Running, whether through leaving the job or the relationship, or by trying to get away from the people who frightened him, would more likely lead to problems. Another trance experience gave him the mode to adopt in the face of conflict. In trance he became a sea turtle and swam

serenely in the warm clear azure waters. That feeling of peace was one he could return to in the midst of anxiety.

Jonathon and Diane separated and he discontinued therapy, but they both attended the monthly posture group for a while. Eventually they reunited and move to another town. Five years later they report they are content in their relationship.

### *Conclusion*

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The ecstatic body postures are a remarkable tool, a gift of profound depth that allows us as therapists to carry on an ancient tradition of healing. These case histories suggest that healing does occur when clients expand into new dimensions of experience with the guidance of the spirits who reside in the Alternate Reality. As therapists we can support that healing and help our clients to weave both aspects of reality into a fabric of wholeness that will support them on their life journeys.

### *References:*

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“Ecstatic Soul Retrieval will be invaluable for all students of the ecstatic trance postures who are interested in the psychological impact of the method. The case studies in Nick’s book provide us with a wide array of material to help us understand how to use the trance postures in the field of therapy. This book will be of great help in teaching more people about the healing power of the ecstatic trance postures.” (Annette Ki Salmen, M.A., teacher and trainer of the Cuyamungue method). “You will be inspired as you read this book. Brink’s use of ecstatic trance in psychotherapy is as natural and replicable as it is brilliant.” (Llyn Roberts, coauthor of *Speaking with Nature*). For the most part, people engage in psychotherapy the same way they did a hundred years ago. It didn’t work well a hundred years ago, and it’s not working much better today. Studies show that about one in three people get significant improvement in long term talk therapy – all while paying hundreds or thousands of dollars for treatment. I call it “Microdose Therapy.” What is that? It’s the practice of taking small amounts of certain drugs to facilitate therapeutic breakthroughs. Typically, the most useful drugs are small amounts of LSD, psilocybin (Magic Mushrooms), Ketamine, or MDMA (better known as XTC). Each of these chemicals can create powerful experiences in high dosages.